Marsha P. Johnson

Marsha P. Johnson (August 24, 1945 – July 6, 1992) was an American gay liberation[4][5] activist and self-identified drag queen.[6] Known as an outspoken advocate for gay rights, Johnson was one of the prominent figures in the Stonewall uprising of 1969.[4][7][8] A founding member of the Gay Liberation Front, Johnson co-founded the gay and transvestite advocacy organization S.T.A.R. (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries), alongside close friend Sylvia Rivera.[9] A popular figure in New York City's gay and art scene, Johnson modeled for Andy Warhol, and performed onstage with the drag performance troupe, Hot Peaches.[4] Known for decades as a welcoming presence in the streets of Greenwich Village, Johnson was known as the "mayor of Christopher Street".[10] From 1987 through 1992, Johnson was an AIDS activist with ACT UP.[4]

Marsha P. Johnson

Born	Malcolm Michaels Jr.[1][2] August 24, 1945[1] Elizabeth, New Jersey, U.S.[3]
Died	July 6, 1992 (aged 46)[3] New York City, New York, U.S.
Known for	Gay liberation and AIDS activist, performer with the Hot Peaches and the Angels of Light

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Early life

Johnson was born Malcolm Michaels Jr. on August 24, 1945 in Elizabeth, New Jersey. She had six siblings and her father, Malcolm Michaels Sr., was an assembly line worker at General Motors while her mother, Alberta Claiborne, was a housekeeper. Johnson attended an African Methodist Episcopal Church as a child and was a devout Christian throughout her life, often taking an interest in Catholicism and other faiths.[3] Johnson first began wearing dresses at the age of five but stopped temporarily because she would get harassed by boys who lived near her house. In a 1992 interview, she described being the young victim of sexual assault by an adolescent.[11][12] Johnson's mother told her that being homosexual is like being "lower than a dog",[13] but Johnson said that her mother was unaware of the LGBT community. After Johnson graduated from the former Edison High School (now the Thomas A. Edison Career and Technical Academy) in Elizabeth in 1963, she left her home for New York City with $15 and a bag of clothes.[3] She waited on tables after moving to Greenwich Village in 1966.[14][15]

Performance work and identity

Johnson initially called herself "Black Marsha" but later decided on "Marsha P. Johnson" as her drag queen name, getting *Johnson* from the restaurant Howard Johnson's on 42nd Street. She said that the *P* stood for "pay it no mind"[16] and used the phrase sarcastically when questioned about her gender, saying "it stands for pay it no mind".[17] She said the phrase once to a judge, who was humored by it and released her. Johnson variably identified herself as gay, as a transvestite, and as a queen (referring to drag queen). According to Susan Stryker, a professor of human gender and sexuality studies at the University of Arizona, Johnson's gender expression may be called *gender non-conforming* in absence of Johnson's use of *transgender*, which was not used broadly during her lifetime.[18]

Johnson said her style of drag was not serious (or "high drag") because she could not afford to purchase clothing from expensive stores.[19] She received leftover flowers after sleeping under tables used for sorting flowers in the Flower District of Manhattan, and was known for placing flowers in her hair.[20] Johnson was tall, slender and often dressed in flowing robes and shiny dresses, red plastic high heels, and bright wigs, which tended to draw attention.[3]

Johnson sang and performed as a member of J. Camicias' international, NYC-based, drag performance troupe, Hot Peaches, from 1972 through to shows in the 1990s.[21][22] When The Cockettes, a similar drag troupe from San Francisco, formed an East Coast troupe, The Angels of Light, Johnson was also asked to perform with them.[23] In 1973, Johnson performed the role of "The Gypsy Queen" in the Angels' production, "The Enchanted Miracle", about the Comet Kohoutek.[24] In 1975, Johnson was photographed by famed artist Andy Warhol, as part of a "Ladies and Gentlemen" series of Polaroids.[25][24] In 1990, Johnson performed with The Hot Peaches in London.[26] Now an AIDS activist, Johnson also appears in The Hot Peaches production *The Heat* in 1990, singing the song "Love" while wearing an ACT UP, "Silence = Death" button.[27]

Stonewall uprising and other activism

Johnson said she was one of the first drag queens to go to the Stonewall Inn, after they began allowing women and drag queens inside; it was previously a bar for only gay men.[8] On the early morning hours of June 28, 1969, the Stonewall uprising occurred. While the first two nights of rioting were the most intense, the clashes with police would result in a series of spontaneous demonstrations and marches through the gay neighborhoods of Greenwich Village for roughly a week afterwards.[28]

Johnson has been named, along with Zazu Nova and Jackie Hormona, by a number of the Stonewall veterans interviewed by David Carter in his book, *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution*, as being "three individuals known to have been in the vanguard" of the pushback against the police at the uprising.[28][25] Johnson denied she had started the uprising, stating in 1987 that she had arrived at around "2:00 [that morning]", and that "the riots had already started" when she arrived and that the Stonewall building "was on fire" after cops set it on fire.[8] The riots reportedly started at around 1:20 that morning after Stormé DeLarverie fought back against the police officer who attempted to arrest her that night.[28]

Carter writes that Robin Souza had reported that fellow Stonewall veterans and gay activists such as Morty Manford and Marty Robinson had told Souza that on the first night, Johnson "threw a shot glass at a mirror in the torched bar screaming, 'I got my civil rights'".[28] Souza told the Gay Activists Alliance shortly afterwards that it "was the shot glass that was heard around the world".[28] Carter, however, concluded that Robinson had given several different accounts of the night and in none of the accounts were Johnson's name brought up, possibly in fear that if he publicly credited the uprising to Johnson due to her well-known mental state and gender nonconforming, then Stonewall, and indirectly the gay liberation movement, "could have been used effectively by the movement's opponents".[28] The alleged "shot glass" incident has also been heavily disputed.[10] Prior to Carter's book, it was claimed Johnson had "thrown a brick" at a police officer, an account that was never verified. Johnson also claimed herself that she was not at the Stonewall Inn when the rioting broke out but instead had heard about it and went to get Sylvia Rivera who was at a park uptown sleeping on a bench to tell her about it. However, many have corroborated that on the second night, Johnson climbed up a lamppost and dropped a bag with a brick in it down on a cop car, shattering the windshield.[28]

Following the Stonewall uprising, Johnson joined the Gay Liberation Front and participated in the first Christopher Street Liberation Pride rally on the first anniversary of the Stonewall rebellion in June 1970. One of Johnson's most notable direct actions occurred in August 1970 when she and fellow GLF members staged a sit-in protest at Weinstein Hall at New York University after administrators canceled a dance when they found out was sponsored by gay organizations.[29] Shortly after that, she and close friend Sylvia Rivera

co-founded the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) organization (initially titled *Street Transvestites Actual Revolutionaries*). The two of them became a visible presence at gay liberation marches and other radical political actions.[4] In 1973, Johnson and Rivera were banned from participating in the gay pride parade by the gay and lesbian committee who were administering the event stating they "weren't gonna allow drag queens" at their marches claiming they were "giving them a bad name".[4] Their response was to march defiantly ahead of the parade.[30][4] During a gay rights rally at New York City Hall in the early '70s, photographed by Diana Davies, a reporter asked Johnson why the group was demonstrating, Johnson shouted into the microphone, "Darling, I want my gay rights now!".[31][32]

Marsha P. Johnson, Joseph Ratanski and Sylvia Rivera in 1973 by Gary LeGault

During another incident around this time, which landed Johnson in court, she was confronted by police officers for hustling in New York, and when they went to apprehend her, she hit them with her handbag, which contained two bricks. When Johnson was asked by the judge why she was hustling, Johnson explained she was trying to secure enough money for her husband's tombstone. During a time when same-sex marriage was illegal in the United States, the judge asked her what "happened to this alleged husband", Johnson responded, "Pigs killed him".[33] Initially sentenced to 90 days in prison for the assault, Johnson's lawyer eventually convinced the judge to send her to Bellevue instead.[33]

With Rivera, Johnson established the STAR House, a shelter for gay and trans street kids in 1972, and paid the rent for it with money they made themselves as sex workers.[34] While the House was not focused on performance, Marsha was a "drag mother" of STAR House, in the longstanding tradition of chosen family in the Black and Latino LGBT community. Johnson worked to provide food, clothing, emotional support and a sense of family for the young drag queens, trans women, gender nonconformists and other gay street kids living on the Christopher Street docks or in their house on the Lower East Side of New York.[35]

In the 1980s Johnson continued her street activism as a respected organizer and marshal with ACT UP. In 1992, when George Segal's Stonewall memorial was moved to Christopher Street from Ohio to recognize the gay liberation movement, Johnson commented, "How many people have died for these two little statues to be put in the park to recognize gay people? How many years does it take for people to see that we're all brothers and sisters and human beings in the human race? I mean how many years does it take for people to see that we're all in this rat race together?"[36]

Mental health and death

By 1966, Johnson lived on the streets[37] and engaged in survival sex.[38] In connection with her sex work, Johnson was arrested many times—by her count, over 100—and was also shot once, in the late-1970s.[3] Johnson spoke of first having a mental breakdown in 1970.[39] According to Bob Kohler, Johnson would walk naked up Christopher Street and be taken away for two or three months to be treated with chlorpromazine, an antipsychotic medication. Upon returning, the medication would wear off over the course of one month and she would then return to normal.[40] Between 1980 and her death in 1992, Johnson lived with her friend Randy Wicker, who invited her to stay the night one time when it was "very cold out—about 10 degrees [Fahrenheit]" (−12 °C).[41]

Though generally regarded as "generous and warmhearted" under her Marsha persona, Johnson's dark side sometimes emerged under Johnson's "male persona as Malcolm",[42] often resulting in Johnson being hospitalized and sedated.[28] During those moments when Johnson's violent side emerged, according to an acquaintance Robert Heide, Johnson could be aggressive and short-tempered and speak in a deeper voice and, as Malcolm, would "become a very nasty, vicious man, looking for fights".[42] This dual personality of Johnson's has been described as "a schizophrenic personality at work".[28] It had been this reason that gay activists had been reluctant at first to credit Johnson for helping to spark the gay liberation movement of the early 1970s due to her mental state.[28] A 1979 Village Voice article titled "The Drag of Politics" by Steven Watson reported that Johnson's saintly personality was "volatile" and listed a roster of gay bars from which she had been banned.[28] At the time of her death in 1992, Johnson was said to be increasingly sick and in a fragile state, according to Wicker.[43]

Shortly after the 1992 pride parade, Johnson's body was discovered floating in the Hudson River.[44] Police initially ruled the death a suicide,[25] but Johnson's friends and other members of the local community insisted Johnson was not suicidal and noted that the back of Johnson's head had a massive wound.[45][46] According to Sylvia Rivera, their friend Bob Kohler believed Johnson had committed suicide due to her ever-increasing fragile state, which Rivera herself disputed, claiming she and Johnson had "made a pact" to "cross the 'river Jordan' (aka Hudson River) together".[47] Randy Wicker later said that Johnson may have hallucinated and walked into the river, or that she may have jumped into the river to escape her harassers, but stated she was never suicidal.[43][10]

Several people came forward to say they had seen Johnson harassed by a group of "thugs" who had also robbed people.[45][46] According to Wicker, a witness saw a neighborhood resident fighting with Johnson on July 4, 1992. During the fight he used a homophobic slur, and later bragged to someone at a bar that he had killed a drag queen named Marsha. The witness was not successful in relaying this information to the police.[10] Other locals stated later that law enforcement was not interested in investigating Johnson's death, stating that the case was about a "gay black man" and wanting little to do with at the time.[48] Johnson was cremated and her ashes were released over the river by her friends following a funeral at the local church. Police allowed Seventh Avenue to be closed while her ashes were carried to the river.[49]

In November 2012, activist Mariah Lopez succeeded in getting the New York police department to reopen the case as a possible homicide.[10]

Tributes

The 2012 documentary *Pay It No Mind – The Life and Times of Marsha P. Johnson* heavily features segments from a 1992 interview with Johnson, which was filmed shortly before her death. Many of her friends from Greenwich Village are interviewed for the documentary.[4]

Johnson appears as a character in two fictional film dramas that are based on real events, including *Stonewall* (2015), where she is played by Otoja Abit,[50] and *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* (2016), where she is played by Mya Taylor. Both movies are creative interpretations, inspired by the Stonewall uprising.

The 2017 documentary, *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson*,[51] follows trans woman Victoria Cruz of the Anti-Violence Project as she investigates Johnson's murder.[52] Like *Pay It No Mind*, it relies on archival footage and interviews.

New York City artist Anohni produced multiple tributes to Johnson, including baroque pop band Antony and the Johnsons[35] (named in Johnson's honor), and a 1995 play about Johnson, "The Ascension of Marsha P. Johnson."[53]

American drag queen and TV personality RuPaul has called Johnson an inspiration, describing her as "the true Drag Mother."[17] During an episode of his show *RuPaul's Drag Race* in 2012, RuPaul told her contestants that Johnson "paved the way for all of [them]".[54]

In 2018 the *New York Times* published a belated obituary for her.[37]

See also

- Lee Brewster – founder of the Queens Liberation Front
- *Paris Is Burning* – film about black drag culture in New York City in the 1980s
- Stormé DeLarverie – biracial lesbian whose resistance of arrest incited the first Stonewall riots
- Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt - fellow Stonewall veteran, artist, and Union County native

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12. Chan 2018: "Later, Johnson said in an interview toward the end of her life, she was sexually assaulted by another boy, who was around 13."
13. Kasino 2012: event occurs at 46:52.
14. Kasino 2012: event occurs at 47:22.
15. Carter 2010.
16. Kasino 2012: event occurs at 37:22; Carter 2010: "In the early days she tended to go out mainly in semidrag and call herself Black Marsha. (When she later dropped the *Black* and started calling herself Marsha P. Johnson, she explained that the *P.* stood for 'Pay it no mind.')"
17. "#LGBTQ: Doc Film, "The Death & Life of Marsha P. Johnson" Debuts At Tribeca Film Fest - The WOW Report" (http://worldofwonder.net/comingattractions-death-life-marsha-p-johnson/) Retrieved July 9, 2017.
18. Chan 2018: "Many transgender people have also come to hail Johnson, and her longtime friend and colleague Sylvia Rivera, as pioneering heroes. (The term transgender was not in wide use in Johnson's lifetime; she usually used female pronouns for herself, but also referred to herself as gay, as a transvestite or simply as a queen.) 'Marsha P. Johnson could be perceived as the most marginalized of people — black, queer, gender-nonconforming, poor,' said Susan Stryker …"
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39. Kasino 2012: event occurs at 20:12.
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External links

- Marsha P. Johnson on IMDb

Photos

- Randy Wicker's Marsha P. Johnson album on Flickr
- Photographs of Marsha P. Johnson by Diana Davies at the New York Public Library Digital Collections (note: the photo of the much younger person, sitting on the table wearing a headscarf, has been mislabeled; it is actually GLF and Youth Group member, Zazu Nova, also a Stonewall veteran)

Videos

- Sylvia Rivera Reflects on the Spirit of Marsha P Johnson on Vimeo (excerpt from an interview with Randy Wicker at the Christopher Street Pier on September 21, 1995)
- "Marsha P Johnson - People's Memorial" on YouTube (conversations with friends of Johnson)
- "Bennie Toney 1992" on YouTube (interview with a friend who may have seen the men who assaulted Johnson)

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